

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



New air plants



Aconite Image



Hoya kerri

Colourful and exotic Tillandsia air plants are great for homes

THE year is racing away, it's hard to believe we're already in March, before I know it, we'll be opening the garden in June and I've not really begun preparations for that yet, it's been too cold and miserable.

I seem to have spent quite a lot of time sitting at my desk in my loft office, overlooking the garden for inspiration in my writing. I've had a small collection of air plants, tillandsia, to the left of my desktop and have recently added some new items to the collection. Air plants originate from Mexico and South America. They are so-named because they use their short, wiry roots to attach themselves to branches, cliff-faces, even electricity and telephone lines, rather than rooting in soil. The most important considerations when cultivating them are their requirements for air, light, water and warmth. Plants can be placed outside in the summer in the UK to benefit from the brighter conditions, rainfall and increased humidity. Return them under glass or bring indoors in early autumn.

Tillandsia have leaves coated in specialised water-absorbent cells called trichomes, which in some species are so dense they give the plants a silvery, frosted appearance. The trichomes are their primary method of obtaining moisture from rainfall or fog. Airplants are often grown on gnarled wood, or shells and rocks to which they are glued for support. Their ornamental appearance and colourful, exotic-looking flowers make them intriguing and popular plants to grow in the home and conservatories. The plants have evolved in sites which all have superior airflow so it is very important to provide a well-ventilated position for them to remain healthy. Tillandsia enjoy bright but diffused light, so provide light shade from direct sunshine, particularly under glass. My collection is arranged in small containers on my desk, finished off with some decorative, lime green reindeer moss!

With Valentine's Day now behind perhaps you might have received a stunning Hoya Kerri succulent as

a gift? This heart shaped plant is a beautiful and unique addition to any collection. With the right care it will thrive for a long time, adding natural beauty and charm to your surroundings. They require minimal watering and should only be watered sparingly, approximately once in 10 days. It is crucial to water the soil, avoiding contact with the leaves, to promote a healthy plant. This succulent thrives in bright light, although it can tolerate light shade. While they require minimal care, periodic dusting may be necessary. Gently remove any dust accumulation with a soft cloth, taking care not to damage the plant's delicate leaves. I've had my plant for over five years now, in a display in my office.

Another great indoor succulent is the aloe zebrina. A stunning houseplant with fleshy orange spikes! This ornate succulent is ideal for a bright spot, away from scorching and direct sun. Its tapered fleshy leaves have bright orange spikes covering them and form a dense rosette of foliage. Aloe zebrina 'Danyz' makes a lovely plant for a windowsill or table centrepiece. It would be perfect when grouped together with other succulents or cacti for a lovely display of contrasting shapes and textures. Like all Aloes, it is easy to grow and needs very little maintenance.

Water regularly to keep the soil evenly moist. Do not leave Aloe in standing water as this may cause it to rot. It should be fed regularly between March and September when it is inactive growth. I've had the one that I'm holding for about 10 years now and have created a number of new plants from the babies that have appeared at its base each year. I gently remove the plant from the pot and tease the new plants away, root the offsets in cactus potting compost and find a new home for them. In the spring or early summer, they produce branched panicles up to 1.5m tall of cylindrical red or orange-red flowers. They are so very easy to look after and are a great focal and talking point.

Winter aconites or Eranthis hyemalis are a welcome source of cheery colour at a time when



Geoff and aloe zebrina plus babies

garden borders can be looking a little bare. Their bright, golden yellow flowers, with a characteristic green ruff, appear on these ground-hugging plants in early February. They look best grown en masse in a natural setting, maybe under trees, where they combine well with snowdrops. Winter aconites can be tricky to establish but once settled they will spread quite naturally. They are actually a member of the buttercup family, this is a tuberous perennial, native to Europe, but there are other species that originate from Asia. After flowering, the plants will die back. Those pictured above were snapped in a garden I visited recently, not growing in my own plot as yet!

Read more of Geoff's garden at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk



Desk arrangement